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Perma/Culture: Imagining Alternatives in an Age of Crisis by Molly Wallace and David Carruthers

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Perma/Culture: Imagining Alternatives in an Age of Crisis edited by **MOLLY WALLACE** and **DAVID CARRUTHERS**
Routledge, 2017 \$140.00 USD

Reviewed by **BRYANT SCOTT**

In the face of climate pessimism and apocalyptic spectacle, Molly Wallace's and David Carruthers's collection, *Perma/Culture: Imagining Alternatives in an Age of Crisis*, offers inspiring and hopeful alternatives from writers, scholars, and activists around the world who are working towards real, sustainable change by building communities that reimagine our relationship with nature. Wallace and Carruthers, and the other fourteen contributors to their collection, are committed to seeing our current crisis as a moment where we must conceptualize and build alternatives. And the contributors to *Perma/Culture* practice what they preach, which is perhaps the most compelling aspect of the collection: each essay balances conceptual change with grassroots activism, innovative agricultural theory with permacultural collectives. Each essay presents an experiment in thinking, seeing, and embodying place-based and sustainable change, and demonstrates clearly that what we really need right now is not a map of the coming inferno but replicable images of a sustainable future that already exist.

As the title illustrates, *Perma/Culture* draws on a substantial body of permacultural work that has attempted over the last few decades to establish localized, sustainable approaches to agriculture, urban planning, architectural and landscape design, and, ultimately, building multifaceted relationships that work with nature, rather than against it.

Coined by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1978 guide, *Permaculture One*, permaculture refers to "a complete agricultural ecosystem" that learns from local plant and animal species and Indigenous knowledges that might lead to a self-sufficient "system that will supply the essential needs of a city, a small settlement, or a large family" (1). While permaculture has been "compatible primarily with landscape architecture and planning" (6), this volume explores how the philosophical underpinnings of the movement can offer possibilities for environmental humanists and for philosophical, literary, and cultural inquiry.

The collection aims to inspire and outline creative approaches to our current climate crisis, which is not to say that pessimism isn't essential, but that one must build on skepticism to be fruitful. The alternatives offered here aren't founded on a "single utopian model for an entirely new world," but rather the "contributors in this volume demonstrate micro-utopian practices among us" (3). These practices often focus on quotidian resistance and a slow, sustained, imaginative effort that takes as its mantra "another world is possible" (106). Neither pessimism nor romanticizing a utopian future has a place in the collection: the notion behind permacultures is to allow for multimodal, interdisciplinary practices of sustainability while always foregrounding the inevitable future that weighs heavily upon us.

Broken up into three parts—"Pattern Languages," "Transitions in Practice," and "Revolution Disguised as Gardening"—*Perma/Culture* offers fourteen meditations for those ready to participate in a sustained effort toward real change. The essays that make up "Pattern Languages" are grounded mainly in literary

and cultural studies. The first two offer close readings of some of the most pervasive and debilitating narratives about our relationship to nature. Andrea Most's "A Pain in the Neck and Permacultural Subjectivity" looks at how we conceptualize ourselves as well as nature (and our relationship to nature), attempting to outline the "cultural mythology that separates mind, body and earth," which she defines as part of the "narrative roadblock" that "tells us that we are invulnerable to and in control of nature, but avoids the unspeakable reality that we are nature" (15). Through a reading of *Middlemarch*, Most employs permacultural principles to conceptualize the relationships between "land, mind, and body" (15) and to consider the agency of our surroundings and the situatedness of our selves. The final three essays in this section offer explorations of the "language of management, mismanagement, neglect, and renewal" (8). Geographically diverse, the essays attempt to read the local against the universalizing practices and ideologies that fetishize free-markets and technological imperialism, disguised as 'development.'

"Transitions in Practice" puts the more conceptual positions espoused in the first section into practice. Maintaining the balance between place-based activism and epistemological imagining, the wide-ranging essays in this section cover everything from "permatravellers" to the Transition Town movement, which assists communities' transition to "a low-carbon, socially-just, healthier and happier future" (97), to "actually existing micro-utopian practices" (9) such as anti-fracking protest camps offering community models for sustainable futures.

"Revolution Disguised as Gardening" turns to the radical social possibilities of

food production. Opening the section, David Carruthers closely examines the "violence inherent in industrial monoculture and its postwar practices" (134), exposing how militarism and metaphor work together to incite large-scale, yet short-sighted and destructive, agricultural planning. He looks specifically at the language of industrial monoculture in the U.S., highlighting the effects military metaphors have on how we think about resources, invasion, and competition.

Next, Leah Penniman offers a moving and personal account of the renewal of "radical black agrarianism" while outlining the ways in which many sustainable farming practices can be traced to black farmers. These practices include contemporary organic farming, as well as what is known as "regenerative agriculture" and community-supported agriculture (CSA). She traces extraordinary farming and agricultural practices back to the slave-trade and, ultimately, to African agriculture. She notes that, "contrary to U.S. mythology," slaves weren't captured merely for their labor but were targeted specifically for their "expertise in necessary farming technologies, such as rice-growing and animal husbandry" (155). Focusing on her role as co-director, program manager, and founder of Soul Fire Farm in upstate New York, Penniman documents her journey through the history of black agricultural knowledges as well as her experience implementing radical farming practices, combating food injustice, and inspiring a new generation of "activist farmers." The next three chapters focus on various aspects of regenerative practices involving cultural understandings of soil, the incorporation of food practices into artistic explorations and aesthetic practices, and an overview of the freegan movement.

Perma/Culture humbly highlights the persistence that real change requires. Most humbling is the commitment—of scholars and writers, readers and activists—to embody a permacultural ethos, permanently; this ethos, unfortunately, still remains somewhat distant from the mainstream, which envisions change as both seamless spectacle, bereft of the daily grind. And it is the focus on this element—the “daily grind”—for which the book is, in my opinion, worthy of the most praise: many of the writers in the collection are *unapologetically* pioneers of praxis. Taken together, the collection offers real, innovative guidelines for thinking and being differently in the world. Interspersed with memoir, poetry, cultural criticism, and travelogue, *Perma/Culture* presents a community of hardworking and dedicated scholars, poets, critics, and theorists offering blueprints for sustainable gardening, traveling, organizing, writing, and thinking. Overall, for general readers, academics, farmers, artists, activists, *Perma/Culture* offers essays that approach grassroots sustainability from many angles, yet always with an eye toward real-world implementation.

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